



Escritoras puertorriqueñas en el siglo XXI: creación y crítica

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**From the Dark Shores of Puerto Rico:
Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro's Portrayal of the Society's Margins in *Los documentados***

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Abstract

This paper considers the political and social content of Arroyo Pizarro's fiction by analyzing how race, class, gender and history become intertwined in *Los documentados*, an epistolary novel that takes place in a Puerto Rican coastal town and is told from the perspective of a deaf nine-year-old girl. She testifies, legitimizes, and transcribes the events of the undocumented immigrants in their desperate attempts to reach the island of Puerto Rico.

The night along the Puerto Rican coast occupies center stage from the beginning of Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro's novel *Los documentados* (2006). The only sound that the reader may perceive belongs to the rhythmic undulations of the waves cascading on the beach. Yet upon closer observation, we witness as silent, dark figures emerge from the waters in a search for respite, hope and opportunity. Arroyo Pizarro, a Puerto Rican writer of African ancestry residing on the island, presents a profound, compassionate narrative wrought with all the emotional complexities of the human experience of those who find themselves at the margins of society. An analysis of her text reveals the author's subversive inversion of the traditional perspective of many realities facing blacks, Dominicans, immigrants and low-income women in the island today.

The cover of the 2010 second edition of the novel shows a close-up photo of a black person's two bare feet standing solemnly on equally barren earth. Also visible are the ends of the rudimentary vestments partially covering the individual's legs. The picture of the brown-skinned feet resting on the brown land would easily lead one to believe that the story that follows centers around people of African descent. While the narrative underscores the plight of blacks and immigrants in Puerto Rico, a reading of the novel should not be limited to an Afrocentric interpretation. The cross-cultural connections, the humanity and the celebration of the natural environment all contribute to a noteworthy undertaking of considerable depth and breath. The story is a contemporary Caribbean one that underscores the incongruencies and peculiarities of Puerto Rico as it highlights the plight of marginalized peoples.

The Boriquen writer, José Luis González argues in *Puerto Rico: The Four Storeyed Country and Other Essays* that of the island's Native American, African, and European roots the African cultural elements provide the core of Puerto Rican identity. González defines the country as being composed of four different tiers or stories, which in many instances correspond to racial divisions. He argues that because blacks and mulattoes were forcibly cut off from Africa as a result of slavery and because they tended not to feel any particular loyalty to the European nations, African-ancestored peoples were the first to accept Puerto Rico as their home (39). Throughout the first three centuries of the country's post-Columbian history, he argues, popular culture was essentially Afro-Antillean in character, which consequently made the island similar to other Caribbean nations (11).

Scholars argue that Luis Rafael Sánchez helped initiate what many viewed as a new literary generation with the collection *En cuerpo de camisa* (1966), in which he

emphasizes the presence and realities of black people in Puerto Rican. Among other renowned writers who recognize and reiterate African cultural contributions in the nation include González, Carmen Colón Pellot, Ana Lydia Vega and Mayra Santos-Febres. Santos-Febres, a contemporary author, has received international acclaim for her numerous literary and scholarly works. Her writings often give preference to marginalized voices such as those of women, gays, and people of African descent.

Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro is a young, prolific writer who has been published worldwide and translated into English, French, Italian and German. Her novel *Los documentados* was awarded the Pen Prize in 2006. She also has various collections of short stories such as *Orgami de letras* (2011), *Ojos de luna* (2007) and *Las negras* (2011) and poems such as *Saeta* (2011), in addition to appearing in numerous noteworthy journals. She has been recognized throughout the world for her literary talent and is also fervently active in the writing and artistic community in the island. Her deeply personal works unabashedly enlighten the plight of the oppressed and oftentimes display sensual and sexualized themes and events.

Los documentados is an epistolary novel that takes place in a Puerto Rican coastal town and is told from the perspective of the nine-year-old, deaf, girl named Kapuc. Their mother raises her alone along with her older brother because the father abandoned them years before the story's beginning. Daily, Kapuc's family struggles to try to understand her emotional and psychological challenges, needs and desires as well as her inability to hear. Nearly each night the young girl goes down to the beach and climbs her favorite tree in the mangrove, which she has affectionately named Humberto and journalizes the world that surrounds her. Among the items that she witnesses along with the stars, the moon, the fauna, the flora and the sea are the repeated nocturnal arrivals of undocumented immigrants. The two worlds intersect as some of her mother's acquaintances become involved with human trafficking and Kapuc herself eventually befriends a boy who consequently attempts to start a new life in the town in which she lives. Her mother's economic struggles put her in close proximity of the immigrants and the oppressed that she has meticulously observed since their unannounced arrival to the island. The novel develops at least three different story lines in which the protagonists unflinchingly attempt to find peace while living in a socio-political system that puts them at a marked disadvantage. Kapuc's journal – interrupted intermittently by a third person omniscient narrator near the text's conclusion – literally and metaphorically documents individuals that society has overlooked, forgotten or persecuted. An understanding of African cultural contributions provides valuable insight into many of the subtle underpinnings of the story's nuances and black people in Puerto Rico. Until the mid-portion of the nineteenth century, Puerto Rico was sparsely populated. Disease and warfare decimated the indigenous peoples, reducing the native inhabitants to around 5000 individuals, down from 500,000 during the Spanish occupation in 1508 (Quintero Rivera 102). By the mid-eighteenth century, explorers had exhausted what little mineral wealth the island formerly possessed, thus reducing the drawing power for potential settlers. Puerto Rico's geographic location served the Spanish fleet as a military outpost and stopover between Spain and its colonies in America, which accounted for a small number of the island's inhabitants.

In contrast to many other Caribbean islands, vast plantation agriculture requiring an expansive labor force never occurred in Puerto Rico on any large scale. In fact, the number of slaves never exceeded 14% of the overall population, though when coupled with the free blacks, this group accounted for a significant portion of the inhabitants

through the early nineteenth century (Knight, *African Dimension* 100). Slaves and free persons of color, consequently, constituted the majority of the scarce population. Angel Quintero Rivera points out that during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, agricultural production was in a developing process (by 1830 only 5.8% of the land was under cultivation) and the population was evenly distributed across the island (103). Scholars such as José Luis González and Gerald Guinness argue that the *Real Cédula de Gracias* of 1815 served to augment the island's European-ancestored population, encouraging immigration of white foreigners (Guinness ix, González 12).¹ Guinness states that “[t]he Spanish authorities had witnessed the success of the recent black uprisings in Haiti and feared their repetition in Puerto Rico” (ix). The new immigrants became landowners and helped fortify a then emerging system of seigniorial haciendas.

The hacienda system -- though initially resembling a feudal regime where an elite group controlled the land and people -- developed into a capitalist economy in the latter part of the nineteenth century and especially after the U.S. takeover. Subsistence cultivation became production designed to maximize profit through commerce. The hacienda system engendered a code of ethics and values that placed the landowners in the most privileged position. Quintero Rivera states the following:

Exploitation (expropriation of surplus) was necessary to satisfy the need of consumption of [the owner's] power and prestige. But just as important for his position -- for his way of life -- was the way that he should be respected, admired and even loved by the hacienda laborers, and the small producers with whom he shared his life. (108)

Though slavery was abolished in 1873, the landowners or *hacendados* managed to keep their work force tied to the land by means of a voucher or credit system. With the U.S. takeover of 1898 came an intense socialization campaign:

U.S. leaders . . . sought to replace Spanish institutions. They had a clear agenda of 'Americanization' of the island, a requisite, in their view, for the eventual self-rule and integration into the United States of a population that they perceived as politically immature and unequipped for self-government. (Morris 24)

This agenda sought to transform the island's population by way of fostering American customs, traditions and values amongst the people, and the U.S. leaders hoped this socialization would eventually lead to annexation.² Part of the process involved pressure to accept English as the official language and to reform schools similar to the American educational system. In 1917 the U.S. Congress passed the Jones Act which increased self-government and granted U.S. citizenship to Puerto Ricans; the islanders overwhelmingly supported the measure. Dispute over the official language persisted (and continues to the present day) as leaders often coupled it with the debate over

¹ The *Real Cédula de Gracias* was authorized by Ferdinand VII of Spain to bolster the colony's population. It granted land to Catholics of all nations who chose to live there. The island attracted immigrants from all of Eastern Europe and the Americas.

² Although this agenda was never fully realized, it had profound effects on Puerto Rican culture, as outlined later in this essay.

statehood versus autonomy. While Puerto Ricans were gradually Americanized, U.S. businesses sought to exploit the island's resources.

The principal resources were land and manpower, which the United States hoped to devote to sugar production. The U.S. explicitly set out to establish lands like Puerto Rico as the primary providers of sugar to offset its profound dependence on imports. Quintero Rivera estimates that the mainland, prior to acquiring the islands as a result of the Spanish American war, imported over 80 percent of the sugar it used (114). He states that it was not by coincidence that, "territories acquired directly or indirectly -- i.e. Hawaii, Puerto Rico, the Philippines and Cuba -- contributed to 76 percent of the sugar consumed in the United States" (114). He adds that the most dominant sugar mills were established by American companies in the decade after the occupation. The U.S. - Puerto Rico relationship, based on a dynamic of imports and exports, became a form of commercial imperialism:

The development of that commerce was such that four decades [after the takeover], during the climax of sugar mono-production, Puerto Rico was the greatest per capita purchaser of U.S. goods. With a population of two million, Puerto Rico was then the U.S.'s second largest customer in Latin America and the ninth largest in the world. (116)

Single crop production existed until the Depression years when unemployment devastated the island's labor force. Adalberto López estimates that around 36 percent of the employable persons were jobless (485). Industry, through Operation Bootstrap, would later occupy a more central role as the island became a supplier to the mainland during the world wars and after.³

These changes from a poly-production society to a mono-production society, and then to a society based primarily on industry, consequently altered the social order. American companies bought out many of the Puerto Rican landowners who came to form a new bourgeois class serving as an intermediary between U.S. businessmen and the populace. The Puerto Rican established classes had initially welcomed the U.S. invasion as they envisioned the political and economic potential of such an alliance. However, as José Luis González states, the propertied class became frustrated:

The subsequent disenchantment only occurred when the new imperial master made it clear that the invasion did not necessarily imply annexation, or the participation of the propertied class in the sumptuous banquet of the expanding American capitalist economy, but instead their colonial subordination to that economy. (19)

³ Operation Bootstrap, as it was commonly known, was a plan developed by the Puerto Rican government to attract U.S. investment for the purpose of increasing the island's industrial production. Helen Icken Safa states it was "designed to transform the island from a stagnant rural economy, dependent largely on the export of sugarcane to American markets, to an industrialized society with higher standards of living through more employment; higher wages, better health, housing, and education; and other social welfare measures" (71).

This disenchantment gave rise to a barrage of nationalistic discourse and mythmaking that purported to celebrate pre-1898 Puerto Rico. González continues in his address on the changes of Puerto Rican society:

When . . . it became clear that the new economic order . . . meant the ruin of the island's propertied class and the beginning of the independent participation of the working-class in the political life of the country, the 'patriotic' rhetoric of the property owners reached such heights of demagoguery that not even the liberal professionals hesitated to ridicule and condemn it. (19-20)

The effects on the working class were less dramatic than those on the former landowners. Although their social class never changed, laborers saw improved working conditions and stabilized wages. González states that the working class viewed the U.S. takeover as an opportunity “for an all-out *settling of scores* with the property-owning class on all fronts” (21). The takeover helped empower the pueblo making it a more unified mass of wage earners, while debilitating its former oppressors (yet establishing new, American oppressors). This lower strata -- to which most people of African descent belonged -- serves as a subject in much of Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro's fiction and warrants further attention especially in terms of the racial issues relevant to this study.

Quintero Rivera stresses that the plantation system, augmented and solidified by the United States, fostered homogeneity among the working class. Blacks, mulattoes and poor white Puerto Ricans shared a range of experiences, including ostracism and racial intermarriage. Sidney Mintz argues:

At the very pinnacle of slave-manned industrial production, in the mid-nineteenth century, repressive labor laws served to bind free white and colored workers to the soil alongside the slaves, thereby creating a social situation which is almost unique in the history of the Caribbean. (410)

He adds further on that “from the start of insular history under the Spaniards, it would be impossible, strictly speaking to consider 'Negro-white relations' as if there were no large intermixed grouping” (410). Arroyo Pizarro's stories bring to the forefront prejudice against immigrants and racial biases prevalent in Puerto Rico, which in turn, provides vast material to analyze regarding the racial categorizations characters and the narrators assign. Miscegenation complicates the assessment of racial categorization -- a phenomenon that assumed greater importance with the American takeover.

A more delineated ideology of racial classification formed part of the cultural baggage accompanying the American takeover, which in turn intensified racism. Franklin Knight stresses that prior to the U.S. arrival, social class served as more of a basis for discrimination than skin color. Strict, unwritten rules existed based on class governed courtship and social opportunities. But with the growing American influence in the 1920s, an institutionalized system of discrimination emerged, drawn along racial lines. The Puerto Rican bourgeoisie and the other established classes began to accept this structural racism as part of the American cultural package. Accordingly, it should be emphasized that Puerto Ricans adapted racist attitudes against other Puerto Ricans

and their race bias had an influence that outstripped the American racism. The U.S. invasion grafted a more systemized racial bias onto the existent prejudices. A clear-cut example of transcultural imposition of racial beliefs occurred during World War I when the U.S. armed forces had great difficulty segregating Puerto Ricans in the Army.

The racial composition of the island does not correspond to mere black/white divisions according to ethnic heritage or skin color. Thomas Mathews quotes one observer who, soon after the American occupation, noted the following:

If all the mulattoes, quadroons, octoroons, quinteros and other mestizos were included with the blacks instead of the whites, the proportions would be changed and the blacks would have a handsome majority upon the island. (316)

Gerald Guinness echoes these sentiments in stating that the majority of the Puerto Rican people today are what he terms "black" and "mestizo" (vii). Mintz perhaps best summarizes the issue of racial classification on the island stating that to do so by American standards of black and white is nearly impossible -- though there are a number of individuals who visibly fall into these categories. He adds that a person attempting such designations

soon discovers large blocs [sic] of individuals who appear to be marginal between 'mixed' and 'white' and between 'mixed' and 'Negro.' In short, the classification system soon collapses of its own weight. (410)

While race proves difficult to assess demographically, racial identity in Puerto Rico, like in many Latin American countries, is often defined by class standing. Often Puerto Ricans use words like "black" (*negro*) or "mulatto" to describe persons of lower social standing and not fundamentally to indicate ethnic heritage. Mathews, in fact, states, "the racial classification of the people of Latin American countries, and of course, Puerto Rico, can change as they move up the social ladder" (317). Raymond Scheele argues that anyone fully accepted into the bourgeois class is considered "non-Negro" regardless or despite his or her physical appearance -- darker persons are said to have indigenous blood (425).⁴ Scheele contrasts socially *accepted* people of African ancestry with those who despite wealth remain marginalized:

A person who has marked Negro physical characteristics and is therefore described as a Negro may have high income, great political power, and advanced education, yet on racial grounds may be excluded from the inner circles of intimate family life, Greek letter sorority or fraternity membership, and the more select social clubs. (424)

⁴ Mathews sarcastically remarks "there are perhaps more 'Indians' on the island of Puerto Rico now than there were at the time of Columbus" (317).

Social acceptance reflects salient issues of class stratification as a consequence of Puerto Rican economic and social history. Racial classifications that take into account skin color and physical appearance become tangible markers to designate differences and can change according to the perspective of the speaker.

We must bear in mind that the island's social structure does not allocate acceptance, and consequently personal liberty, equally within any particular economic or social group. In Arroyo Pizarro's writing she brings to the surface themes that women of all colors and classes confront and, therefore, women's situations need to be understood to appreciate better the textual inferences.

Women in Puerto Rico existed under the subordination of a patriarchal system similar to women in other Latin American countries. A mentality of *Marianismo* characterized the country in that the preeminent role for women consisted in following the ideal of the Virgin Mary: "long-suffering but never complaining, sheltered and protected from evil world influences" (Icken Safa 70). Edna Acosta-Belén states that women were expected to be obedient daughters, faithful wives and devoted mothers (274). One of the champions for the Puerto Rican women's movement during the first decades of the century was Luisa Capetillo. Isabel Pico Vidal states that Capetillo "condemned religious fanaticism, the double standard, women's slavery in marriage, and economic exploitation in the factory," and she was one of the first women in Puerto Rico to wear slacks in public (209). With the advent of American rule, feminist consciousness increased as more women became educated and worked beside men outside of the home.

The U.S. government set out to augment the educational system as only eight percent of the school age children were enrolled under Spanish rule, and consequently, the general population was illiterate (Morris 25). In 1903, authorities established the University of Puerto Rico, in which, by 1923, 74 percent of its graduates were women (Pico Vidal 210). However, opportunities for higher education presented themselves primarily to women from established and middle class families. Their social consciousness of the women's struggle differed from the working class women's ideals and, as a result, the objectives for gender equality became divided along class lines.

Women's suffrage became the objective of middle and upper class women. These were the same women who benefitted most from the then expanded opportunities in education and who formed the majority of all the women enrolled in schools. This education allowed them to acquire teaching and clerical positions.⁵ Women eventually gained the right to vote through a bill approved in 1929. As in other countries, suffrage was granted only to literate women, further alienating lower class women -- the majority of whom were still illiterate -- and increasing the political power of the established classes. In 1936, the government repealed the literacy requirement, but the ideological differences between the classes were steadfastly formed through daily concrete experiences.

Working class women acquired a particular viewpoint towards gender equality that resulted from increased employment opportunities outside the home. Women worked with men in tobacco and sugar production and later, during Operation Bootstrap, joined the industrial work force often receiving wages significantly lower

⁵ Pico Vidal states that teaching, clerical and later nursing work became "female occupations" dominated by upper and middle class women. By 1930, 74.5 percent of all teachers and 66 percent of all clerical workers were women (206).

than those of men (Icken Safa 72). Spurred by U.S. intervention, industrialization Americanized established ideologies, contradicting (or corrupting) the patriarchal values and institutions of the old Puerto Rican agrarian society (Acosta-Belén 279). Women joined trade unions and eventually organized women-only associations within these unions where they focused their efforts on improving salaries, hours and working conditions. Icken Safa argues that because working class women lacked many of the privileges of the elite class, their subordination both inside and outside the home was more “visible and onerous” (70). Some historians, like Icken Safa, view the division of interests along the lines of class as irreparable:

historical class split in the women's movement, both in the United States and in Puerto Rico, points to the virtual impossibility of building a women's movement across class lines. Historically, as well as in the present, the class interests of elite and working-class women are too diverse, and this cannot overcome a common sense of sexual subordination. (82)

The political and social criticism in Arroyo Pizarro's fiction may arguably be interpreted as presenting the commonalities between the classes in the feminist struggle. Race, class, gender, and history become intertwined in texts structured and developed through literary devices such as irony, and these works merit closer scrutiny. As Henry Louis Gates argues that “we must. . . analyze the ways in which writing relates to race, how attitudes toward racial differences generate and structure literary texts by us *and* about us” (15). Once we begin to identify and understand the racial underpinnings of a particular text, we can begin to comprehend the racial subtleties involved in the literary construction. Consequently, we may observe our societies with increased racial sensitivities.

The basis of what we observe as readers of *Los documentados* comes to us from the perspective of the nine-year old deaf girl, Kapuc. Along with the natural surroundings from her view high in her favorite tree in the mangrove Humberto – which she has named after her mother's immigrant boyfriend -- she witnesses a plethora of human clandestine activity as noted for commencement of the work's first chapter: “Intentan huir, como siempre. Así hacen todos los que desembarcan y se adentran en el manglar. Siguen una bitácora imaginaria, recorren un mapa inventado. Corren.” (9). Later she affirms her passion to capture in writing all that she encounters.

Escribo sobre los que se escapan con el mismo fervor que documento a los jueyes y a las aves que pueden navegar gracias al Sol y a las estrellas, astros que cambian de posición a medida que el tiempo pasa, y que sirven para esgrimir latitudes y marcar constelaciones. (13)

She writes about all those things that are interconnected – the plants, the animals, and the people – in the world that surrounds her.

Her vantage point from up in the tree where she is able to see and not necessarily be seen coupled with the activity of documenting her observations complete a fundamental function in the workings of the narrative. Michel Foucault describes a similar concept as panopticism in *Discipline & Punish* in which the watchtower is the

institutionalized apparatus used to monitor and subsequently control the inhabitants of an asylum or prison. The panopticism in Arroyo Pizarro's story is inverted in almost a Bakhtinain carnivalesque manner. In *Los documentados* the overseer in one sense lacks authority in that she is a prepubescent young girl who additionally is unable to hear. Nevertheless, she testifies, legitimizes, and transcribes – that is officially documents – the events of these undocumented immigrants in their desperate attempts to reach the island.

Throughout the novel we are given insight as to some of the casualties of the perilous undertakings to achieve a better life by means of newspaper articles that Kapuc reads. The articles speak of the statistical outcomes of some of the ill-fated travelers: “SE AHOGAN TRES ILEGALES EN CAMUY, leía el titular de el periódico EL VOCERO de “Puerto Rico la madrugada siguiente” (109). Another example is the following:

Noticiero de las cinco. Uno de cada diez dominicanos muere tratando de llegar Puerto Rico, decía la reportera. Una muestra de cámara de una playa en Cabo Rojo y la ampliación de la información. Uno de cada diez dominicanos que se embarca en travesías a Puerto Rico en busca de una vida mejor muere en su intento de alcanzar sus costas, según informes de la Organización Internacional para la Migraciones (OIM). (173)

However a greater sense of the living, breathing lives that have been upended comes from the pages of Kapuc's documentations,

Corren con desespero. Como si estuvieran desembarcando una carabela atiborrada de colonizadores. . . Como si el tiempo se les escurriera en la búsqueda de un terreno encantado en donde la equis ha de marcar el Tesoro, palean la arena con los pies en una caminata de zozobra. (9)

We are left to wonder about the ones who do not make it to land.

And yet and still for the others that arrive to Puerto Rico, their lives and livelihood are continually challenged not only by the official bureaucracy and legal ramifications, but also by the biased mentalities of those they might encounter. The situation of Kapuc's mother, Karen, and her boyfriend Humberto, who tries to pass as a Cuban, vividly illustrates some of the obstacles some of the immigrants encounter:

Karen le había preguntado el motive de aquel engaño, de tal infamia. Humberto le había explicado que había encontrado en la isla siempre más racismo y prejuicios en contra de sus hermanos dominicanos que en contra de los cubanos. ‘De dos males, el peor’, había mencionado él, esta vez, sin ningún falso acento cubano. Y como era un dominicano de piel blanca, se le había hecho sumamente fácil continuar con la farsa. (83)

The story continues later on with the following:

Si tan solo ella pudiera ser como Manena, si tan solo pudiera portar esa tolerancia racial para lograr alcanzar la felicidad al lado de un hombre tan bueno como Humberto. Pero no podía. Nunca podría aguantar los chistes y las reseñas difamatorias que se hacía a todas luces desmereciendo la inteligencia de esta raza, los comentarios malintencionados y racistas a los indocumentados que invadían el litoral en yola, el trato discriminatorio e intolerante que generalmente se ofrecía a los dominicanos. Aún si ella se decidiera a cambiar su punto de vista y a dars una oportunidad para ser feliz con Humberto, el resto de Puerto Rico no cambiaría nunca, y de seguro sería ella una desdichada para el resto de su vida. (83)

Race and racism come to the forefront as well as the call for human treatment of all people. Puerto Rico, which derives its name because of the fact that it was viewed as a rich port for the Spanish tradesmen, in the novel it is seen as a poor probability for achieving a new or better life for darker-shinned Caribbean immigrants.

The reconciliation between Karen and her Dominican boyfriend at the story's conclusion provides a possibility of hope for a better future. Kapuc has grown and no longer records in her journal the human traffic that flows below her favorite tree: "Al manglar poco lo visito. Con mi nuevo horario escolar se hace muy cuesta arriba. Sin embargo los fines de semana trato de siempre treparme, aunque ya no documento. Ya no puedo. Duele demasiado" (182). The painful realization that people are still dying for chance to arrive to Puerto Rico still exists. However, because of Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro's profoundly moving novel, the real life participants in this daunting quest for a better life will never be undocumented.

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